DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 309 329 CG 021 773

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TITLE Perspectives about Social Workers.
PUB DATE Apr 89
NOTE 32p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Southwestern Psychological Association (35th, Houston, TX, April 13-15, 1989).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Client Characteristics (Human Services); *College Students; Higher Education; *Social Work; *Social Workers; *Student Attitudes; *Work Attitudes

ABSTRACT

Previous research has shown that career preferences are dependent upon the words and images that individuals associate with various occupations. The present study sought to identify differences and similarities between college students' and social workers' views toward social work. College students majoring in psychology (N=25) and social workers (N=18) described their first reaction to the term "social workers"; their image of social workers; and their impressions about social workers' tasks, type of clientele, and entry level salary. The analysis relied primarily on content analysis and the assessments of three blind "judges." In general, the college students gave more negative evaluations to social work. Students and social workers also differed in their views about the kinds of activities in which social workers engaged and in the types of clientele with whom social workers worked. However, students had accurate perceptions about social workers' gender, age, social class, and income. Overall, students had less favorable set of words and images about social work than did social workers. Additional research is needed to identify how and when students acquire these words and images. (Author/ABL)

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Perspectives About Social Workers

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Running head: SOCIAL WORKERS

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Abstract

The present study sought to identify differences and similarities between college students' and social workers' views toward social work. Thirty-six college students and 18 social workers described their first reaction to the word social worker(ers), their image of a social workers, as well as their impressions about social workers' tasks, type of clientele, and entry level salary. Our analysis relied primarily on content analysis and the assessments of three blind judges. In general, the college students gave more negative evaluations to social work. Students and social workers also differed in their views about the kinds of activities in which social workers engaged and in the types of clientele with whom social workers worked. However, students had accurate perceptions about social workers' gender, age, social class, and income. The authors propose a dual process explanation to explain why many service oriented students are unwilling to consider social work as a viable career alternative.

Perspectives About Social Workers

One theory of career development (Mitchell, Jones, & Krumboltz, 1979) emphasizes that career preferences influence career choices. The theory argues that individuals acquire career preferences through the influence of four antecedent factors associated with a career: social reinforcement, words and images, modeling, and direct reinforcement. Ware (1980) investigated the relative influence of those four factors on the acquisition of career-related preferences (i. e., for a major and/or occupation) among sophomores and juniors in a college of arts and sciences. Students identified social reinforcement as the most important, followed by words and images. Subsequently, Ware and Pogge (1981) found that words and images, consisting of evaluative ratings on eight items associated with persons in and consequences with careers, correlated significantly with male college students' preferences for 5 out of 6 careers and with female college students' preferences for 4 out of 6 careers. Findings from those studies support the theory's contention that career preferences are dependent on the words and images that individuals associate with various occupations.

Just as some investigators have studied students' career preferences, others have surveyed students' career choices (e. g., Ware & Meyer, 1981; Wise, Smith, & Fulkerson, 1983). Results from alumni surveys of psychology majors have revealed that at least 41% of those students pursued employment immediately following graduation. The remaining graduates entered a wide range of graduate and professional programs. Thus, psychology graduates exhibit diversity in their career pursuits although they do display some

similarities. Large numbers of them pursue careers that Holland (1973) identified as having a social theme. Examples include clinical psychologist, admissions counselor, school psychologist, youth counselor, and guidance counselors. However, very few psychology majors consider, much less pursue, social work despite its social theme and role as a mental health profession. Anecdotal evidence suggests that the lack of interest in and unfavorable attitude toward social work for college students, in particular, and people, in general, is because they have a limited or erroneous perspective about who social workers are, what they do, and with whom they work.

A literature review produced several pertinent studies that assessed views toward social work by the public, professionals, and college students. Condie, Hanson, Lang, Moss, & Kane (1978) surveyed 250 adults from a large city and smaller towns to determine the public's response to social work. Respondents believed that social work was a profession that gives help to people of all social classes, and they did not believe that social workers primarily took care of people on welfare or gave people their welfare checks. Those results indicated that, in some cases, the public's views were both positive and accurate. However, participants also held misconceptions, including the belief that social workers did administer psychological tests and didn't work in settings such as private practice, industry, or city planning.

Weir (1981) reported the results of a national quota survey, consisting of 994 young adults and adults in Great Britain. The survey investigated the public's attitudes and views about the roles and tasks of social workers. He found that 48% believed that social workers were "caring people in a difficult job" but

that only 9% selected social workers as the most valued professionals in the community When questioned about social workers' primary duties, 76% responded that they should "visit disabled people to investigate their needs", 64% selected "help poor people get their rights, and 54% chose "help people with emotional problems" The public viewed social workers' clientele as consisting of children and families with social or domestic troubles Weir concluded that 9 years after establishing social services departments, in which social workers have a wide range of responsibilities, the public continues to view them in their previous and more limited "welfare" capacity

D'Iorio, Hershenson, & Hafer (1975) sampled masters level social workers, other service professionals (psychologists and rehabilitation counselors), and non-service professionals (computer scientists) The authors compared each group's semantic differential ratings of social workers Findings indicated that evaluative ratings of social work by service professionals were higher than those of non-service professionals, but service professionals did not rate social work as high as social workers rated their field The results of this and previous studies (Condie, Hanson, Lang, Moss, & Kane 1978; Weir,1981) suggest that service and non-service professionals may not view social workers as favorably as the general public

McMichael & Irvine (1984) conducted a study of student social workers' and student elementary teachers' views toward the profession of social work The investigators used a modified version of the semantic differential to measure subjects' connotative perceptions of social work The results indicated that both groups evaluated social workers rather positively on personal

relationship scales, and both groups saw social workers as political moderates However, the two groups differed on several scales. The student teachers were more favorably disposed to social work than were the student social workers Social work students tended to describe social work as rather hard and sloppy The findings of this study indicate variability in the attitudes that different groups of student professionals hold toward social work, with social work students being more critical.

We found only one study that investigated college students' views toward social workers. Alperin & Benedict (1985) asked 180 undergraduates' to rate social workers, psychologists, and psychiatrists on 85 adjectives. The results indicated that students viewed social workers as "warm and easy to relate to but not particularly intelligent." The investigators also asked the students to decide which professional would be the appropriate one to handle seven different problems. Findings revealed that students were more likely to consult psychologists and psychiatrists for most of their personal and interpersonal problems. This mixed review of social workers by college students is consistent with that of masters level professionals (D'Iorio, Hershenson, & Hafer, 1975) and the general public (Condie, Hanson, Lang, Moss, & Kane, 1978; Weir,1981)

The purpose of this pilot investigation was to identify the salient dimensions on which college students hold different and similar views than social workers themselves. We decided that an open ended format would provide qualitative information not available using conventional measures, such as structured responses, semantic differential ratings, or adjective ratings. This study constitutes a first step toward identifying the words and images that

college students possess about social work(ers) and how those impressions contribute to the students' likelihood of considering social work as a professional pursuit.

Method

Participants

Twenty-five psychology majors enrolled in a career development course and 18 practicing social workers participated in this study. The student sample consisted of 15 women and 10 men. There were 14 juniors and 11 seniors. The students' ages ranged from 20 to 23 with a median age of 20.5. The sample of social workers consisted of 14 women and 4 men selected from three private social services agencies in the metropolitan Omaha area. All worked primarily as therapists in their agencies and had MSW degrees. The social workers' ages ranged from 30 to 65 with a median age of 37 years.

Materials and Procedure

Instructions to participants consisted of asking them to give their first impressions when they heard the words "social work" or "social workers." The instructions also asked participants (a) to describe a social worker, that is, what one looked like, (b) to identify the tasks or activities that a social worker performed, (c) to list the types of clientele with whom social workers worked, and (d) to estimate the entry level salary for a social worker possessing an MSW. The course instructor administered the instructions to the students and a research liaison administered the instructions to the social workers.

Data Analysis

We used content analysis (Holsti, 1968) to evaluate the responses of students and social workers. Units of analysis were words, phrases, or sentences that participants used in responding to the instructions. Table 1 contains the several dimensions and categories that we developed for assessing participants' responses.

Insert Table 1 about here

One male and two female judges used the dimensions and categories in the assessment process. Judges were blind; they did not know whether students or social worker gave responses, nor did they know how the other judges coded the responses. Each judge made a total of 574 decisions in coding participants' response. Our criterion for agreement was that at least two of the three judges gave the same code. There were 529 instances in which two out of three judges agreed. Thus, there was 92% interjudge agreement. The items on which judges could not agree were proportionately distributed across students' and social workers' responses. Thus, we detected no biases in judges failure to agree on the participants' responses.

Results

We evaluated the percent of students' and social workers' coded responses across the categories for each dimension. We did not perform chi square or other statistical analyses because of the exploratory nature of the study and because of the limited number of observations. The objectives of our

evaluation were to discover trends in the data and to illuminate directions for future research using more sophisticated measurement techniques

Initially, we examined the salient differences in responses that college students and social workers made. Table 2 contains judges' coding of two lists of words that college students and social workers generated. The coding was based on an evaluative dimension. Inspection of Table 2 reveals that college students used words having a consistently larger number of negative connotations, and social workers used words having a consistently larger number of positive connotations.

Insert Table 2 about here

An examination of traits associated with participants' descriptions of social workers also revealed an evaluative tendency by the students. Inspection of Table 3 reveals that college students' responses had both positive and negative connotations; social workers' were almost exclusively positive. There were also similarities in the college students' and social workers' descriptions Table 3 illustrates that both college students and social workers perceived social workers as primarily women. In addition both groups described social workers as young/middle aged and middle class.

Insert Table 3 and 4 about here

The data in Table 4 contain the results of judges' coding of participants responses to the question about what social workers do. Inspection of the data for the involvement and status quo dimensions reveals that college students perceived social workers' tasks as consisting of active intervention and improving clients' status. By contrast, social workers describe their work as primarily supportive and maintaining their clients' status quo. The results for the individual/group dimension in Table 4 require special attention. The data show that college students gave responses emphasizing work with groups, whereas the majority of social works' responses were coded none. Inspection of the social workers' responses indicates that their descriptions emphasized the tasks they performed (e. g., goal-setting, problem-solving, resource finding, advocacy, therapy, and community development). Thus, the students perspective about the work appears limited to recognizing that social workers work with people, the benefactors of social work activity. However, social workers emphasize the specific skills and activities involved with the profession. Thus, students' views of social workers' occupational demands appear to be naive and limited. In general, both college students and social workers perceived treatment as reactive (Table 4), that is, dealing with situations in which a problem had already arisen versus promoting preventative actions.

How did the two groups describe the types of clientele with whom social workers work? Table 5 contains the judges' codings of the two lists of words that participants produced. Of particular note are the data for the problematic dimension. The results indicate that college students' responses reflected a

survival connotation, whereas none of the social workers' responses had that connotation. The data suggest that many college students have the impression that the social workers' clientele consist of desperate, barely surviving individuals. There was a clear trend among college students and social workers responses to view social workers' clientele as groups of people, who were community-based (i. e., black, Hispanic, old people, etc) and who came from a wide range of socio-economic classes.

Insert Table 5 about here

The results of an independent groups t-test revealed no significant difference between students' and social workers' estimates of the entry level salary for a social worker with an MSW, $t(38.43) = 0.61$, $p > .55$. The means and standard deviations for the students and social workers were $M = 15,397.8$, $SD = 3,228.2$ and $M = 15,861.1$, $SD = 1,738.9$, respectively.

Discussion

The present study was a pilot investigation attempting to identify the differences and similarities in views that college students and social workers hold about social work and social workers. That college students responded more negatively than social workers on the word association task is consistent with Alperin and Benedict's (1985) findings that college students perceived social workers as "not too intelligent" and that students would not select a social worker for help with personal problems. In the present study, students' less

favorable evaluation of social workers was similar to that of service professionals (D'Iorio, Hershenson, & Hafer's, 1975), who did not evaluate social workers as highly as social workers evaluated themselves. However, the results from our study are not consistent with Weir's (1981) findings that the general public in Great Britain saw social workers as "caring people." This discrepancy may reflect differences between the cultures, the samples, the dependent variables, or some combination of these and other variables. Additional research is needed to identify the factors contributing to more or less favorable evaluations by those who are not social workers.

College students' trait evaluations were also more variable than social workers'; the students gave equal numbers of positive and negative traits, whereas the social workers gave generally positive traits. This more varied view of social work may reflect the students lack of experience with the profession, the social workers more favorable perception of their profession, or both. To their credit, students' perceptions that social workers are primarily women, middle aged or younger, and middle class are consistent with those of social workers. Thus, the students views of selected demographic characteristics associated with social workers appear accurate and realistic. The absence of any directly comparable studies about the public or social workers' descriptions of the physical characteristics of social workers makes comparisons impossible. Future studies should examine people's perceptions about these qualities as a further aid to understanding how students develop the connotative words and images they have about social workers.

Our findings about how students and social workers assess the professional pursuits of social workers revealed two stark contrasts. First, students saw social workers engaging in active intervention to improve their client's status, whereas the social workers viewed themselves in a supportive position that served to maintain their clients' status quo. Secondly, the students were only able to say that social workers worked with groups of peoples, but the social workers articulated the variety of tasks that they performed, including goal-setting, problem-solving, advocacy, therapy, and community development. In short, students demonstrated a naive and inaccurate knowledge about social workers skills and services. Others have also reported inaccuracies in the public knowledge of social workers' performance. For example, Condie, Hanson, Lang, Moss, and Kane, (1978) reported that adults incorrectly thought that social workers administered tests. Weir (1981) reported that the public in Great Britain possessed an inaccurate and outdated view of social workers as only engaging in welfare related activities.

Our findings indicate that college students and social workers have very different views about social workers' clients. Many college students appear to think that those clients are desperate, barely surviving individuals. Such misconceptions have not been reported in previous studies using adult populations. However the college students' views about social workers' clients are not completely inaccurate. Students perceptions were congruent with those of social workers in identifying clients as including community-based groups. The finding of accurate perceptions about social workers clients is similar to Weir's (1981) results; he reported that his sample from Great Britain was aware

that social workers worked with children and families with social and domestic problems. Finally, our sample of college students realized that social workers' clients came from a broad spectrum of socio-economic classes; our findings are consistent with those of Condie, Hanson, Lang, Moss, and Kane, (1978), who reported that their sample recognized that social workers' clients were not limited to the poor or low income. While these latter findings about clientele did not reflect the entire range of clients that social workers in Great Britain worked with, neither was it as distorted as the views of the college students in the present study.

From our preliminary findings, we have concluded that students have a less favorable set of words and images about social work than do social workers. The source of this less favorable evaluation may be explained in terms of two processes inferred from the differences and similarities in their views of social work. The students' erroneous and misinformed views about what social workers do (i. e., the involvement, status quo, and individual/group dimensions) and the types of clients with whom they work (i. e., the problematic dimension) may contribute to their less favorable attitude. But the students' realistic perspective that social workers were mostly women, who were younger, middle class, and earned starting salaries of from $15-16,000 may also have contributed to their unfavorable impression about social work. Research (Touhey, 1974) indicates that occupational prestige decreased with an increase in the number of women in that occupation. Moreover, the entry level starting salary is several thousand dollars less than that for most positions in business requiring only a bachelor's degree.

The use of content analysis in the present study has provided some tentative insights into college students' views about social work and has suggested promising directions for developing more sophisticated measuring instruments. Surveys can be tailored to identifying more precisely students' inaccurate and accurate perceptions about social work and social workers. Once we have identified students' views, we can evaluate strategies for developing more realistic or mature views toward social work. Such an approach is consistent with Keith's (1980) findings. He surveyed 301 individuals, who were from urban and rural settings. The study identified several factors contributing to attitudes toward social work. Using a multiple regression approach, Keith found that the knowledge of social work variable (i. e., words and images) contributed substantially to favorable attitudes toward social work. Perhaps, college students need more factual and salient information about the profession of social work. Types of media presentations should be explored to discover which ones are most effective for communicating accurate words and images. For example, future research should investigate the relative effectiveness of printed, video, and live presentations of material.

Two caveats are in order. First, the possession of accurate information about social work does not, by itself, guarantee that students will like it. Occupations with social themes, for example, will not likely appeal to those who have realistic personality themes (Holland, 1973), regardless of the accuracy of their perceptions about that occupation. Moreover, relatively low starting salaries will discourage many students who might otherwise be interested in a career having a high degree of social contact. Second, students may not choose

social work even if they like and respect it because there are other factors (e. g., career decision making skills and entry behaviors) that contribute to selecting an occupation (Mitchell, Jones, & Krumboltz, 1979). However, educators can take satisfaction in knowing that if students acquire more accurate information about social work (or any other occupation), their choice of not pursuing that occupation would be based on more mature and realistic decision making. Finally, increased realism about social work, by itself, is probably not sufficient to change a negative image if negative connotations about social work are being reinforced by a high percentage of female social workers. Efforts directed at changing this view about women in the workplace will require changing the cultural bias that discriminates against women. Such a change is probably beyond the capability of career educators alone.

Additional research is needed to identify how and when students acquire these words and images about social work. What role do media presentations (e. g., TV, newspapers, movies, etc.) about social work play in students' impressions? Research can examine media presentations to identify sources of inaccurate information. Are students most vulnerable to erroneous words and images when they are in high school or even earlier? How much do individual histories, including contact with social workers play in impression formation? How do the words and images of one occupation influence those of another; for example, how are students' views about clinical psychology related to their views toward social work? Are students as unrealistic about clinical psychology as they are about social work, only in a more favorable way? These and other questions must await the results of additional research.

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Author Notes

The authors express deep appreciation to Rhonda Akkerman, Jeff Kearney, and Alysen Kennedy for their assistance in coding the participants' responses.

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Table 1

Dimensions and categories for coding participants' responses to the word association, description of a social worker, job activities, and type of clientele.

I. Word Association

A. evaluative dimension

a) positive (e. g., friendly)

b) negative (e. g., bankruptcy)

c) neutral/unsure/don't know (e. g., calendar)

II. Personal Descriptions

A. trait-evaluative dimension

a) positive

b) negative

c) neutral/don't know/unsure

B. gender dimension

a) men

b) women

c) both

d) neither

C. age of the person dimension

a) young (20-39)

b) middle age (40-59)

c) senior/old (60+)

d) not specified/qualified for more than one of the categories

Table 1 (continued)

D. socio-economic status dimension

a) lower class

b) lower-middle class

c) middle class

d) not specified or unsure

III. Job Description

A. level of involvement dimension

a) education - to provide enough knowledge to increase a person's competency in a given area of living

b) supportive - to lend emotional support, counsel, to provide a "sounding board" for a person's problems (e. g., individual counseling, scheduled dialogues, planning conferences)

c) active intervention - to involve physically one's self in the management of another person's life (e. g., in-home treatment, financial planning, daily schedule provision and activation)

d) qualify for more than one category

e) not specified/don't know - use this category if the activities listed do not qualify for any of the above categories.

Table 1 (continued)

B. status quo assistance dimension

a) maintain status quo - to assist a person(s) in effectively managing and/or dealing with a current lifestyle (e. g., therapy session)

b) improve status quo - to assist a person(s) in improving their current lifestyle, either physically or psychologically (e. g., acquisition of additional money, self-improvement seminars)

c) both - this is designated for descriptions that could quality as both maintenance and improvement of a person's lifestyle (e. g., acquisition of any federal money)

d) not specified/unsure

C. individual/group orientation dimension

a) individual - if the description refers to one unit or one person (e. g., show a person how to plan his/her taxes)

b) group - when more than one person or unit is referred to and the noun may be specific (e. g., chorus is specific and them is general)

c) none - if no mention of a specific unit or number of people is made (e. g., help broaden their horizons)

Table 1 (continued)

D. treatment continuum dimension

a) reactive - when a problem is dealt with after something has gone wrong. This commonly referred to as "band aid treatment" or "picking up the pieces" (e. g., teaching a teenage girl about contraception when she's 5 months pregnant)

b) preventative - taking actions to prevent an emergency or problem from occurring (e. g., having the car brakes checked before setting out on a long-distance drive)

c) unsure/neither - to be used when the description doesn't fit either category or you are unsure

IV. Type of Client

A. problematic dimension

a) survival - those phrases which describe physical problems (e. g., malnourished)

b) security/affiliation - phrases that describe emotional problems (e. g., marital disputes)

c) both - phrases that could fit into both survival and security/affiliation (e. g., neglect)

d) unsure/none of the above

Table 1 (continued)

B. individual/group dimension

a) none - if no mention of a specific unit or number of people is made (e. g., helpless)

b) individual - if the description refers to one person (e. g., someone who needs help)

c) group - when more than one person is referred to (e. g., students)

C. type of group dimension

a) children - reference to more than one child referred to as a separate entity outside the context of a specific family or home setting (e. g., orphans, neglected children)

b) family - any group of people that are referred to as living together or biologically related (e. g., siblings, parents and kinds)

c) community - any group of people that are drawn together by some common interest or characteristic (e. g., blue collar workers)

d) don't know/not specified - group descriptions that cannot be classified on the above mentioned categories

D. socio-economic status dimension

a) lower class through middle class

b) all classes

c) none/unsure

Table 2

Coding of word association on the evaluative dimension

	Impression			
	Impression #1		Impression #2	
Dimension	College Students	Social Workers	College Students	Social Workers
Evaluative				
Positive	2 (10)	12 (71)	4 (25)	10 (77)
Negative	17 (81)	2 (12)	11 (69)	3 (23)
Neutral	2 (10)	3 (18)	1 (6)	0 (0)

Note. Values in parentheses are percents.

Table 3

Coding of personal descriptions on the trait-evaluative, gender, age, and socio-economic status dimensions

Dimension	Group	
	College Students	Social Workers
Trait-evaluative		
Positive	11 (41)	8 (89)
Negative	11 (41)	1 (11)
Neutral	5 (19)	0 (0)
Gender		
Men	1 (4)	0 (0)
Women	16 (67)	12 (67)
Both	2 (8)	1 (6)
Neither	5 (21)	5 (28)
Age		
Young	6 (25)	5 (29)
Middle age	5 (21)	3 (18)
Senior/Old	1 (4)	0 (0)
Not specified	12 (50	9 (53)

Table 3 (continued)

Coding of personal descriptions on the trait-evaluative, gender, age, and socio-economic status dimensions

Dimension	Group: College Students	Group: Social Workers
Socio-economic status		
Lower	3 (13)	1 (6)
Lower-middle	2 (8)	1 (6)
Middle	6 (25)	6 (33)
Not specified	13 (54)	10 (56)

Note. Values in parentheses are percents.

Table 4

Coding of job description on the involvement, status quo, individual/group, and treatment dimensions

Dimension	Group: College Students	Group: Social Workers
Involvement		
Education	1 (5)	0 (0)
Supportive	2 (11)	9 (69)
Active intervention	13 (68)	2 (15)
More than one	1 (5)	1 (8)
Not specified	2 (11)	1 (8)
Status quo		
Maintain	2 (10)	7 (58)
Improve	17 (81)	3 (25)
Both	2 (10)	2 (17)
Individual/Group		
Individual	0 (0)	1 (6)
Group	19 (76)	3 (17)
None	6 (24)	14 (78)

Table 4 (continued)

Coding of job description on the involvement, status quo, individual/group, and treatment dimensions

Dimension	Group	
	College Students	Social Workers
Treatment		
Reactive	17 (71)	10 (83)
Preventative	6 (25)	2 (17)
Unsure	1 (4)	0 (0)

Note. Values in parentheses are percents.

Table 5

Coding of the types of client on the problematic, individual/group, group type, and socio-economic status dimensions

	Impression			
	List #1		List #2	
Dimension	College Students	Social Workers	College Students	Social Workers
Problematic				
Survival	6 (29)	0 (0)	8 (47)	0 (0)
Security/affiliation	0 (0)	1 (6)	1 (6)	0 (0)
Both	1 (5)	2 (11)	1 (6)	3 (21)
Unsure	14 (67)	15 (83)	7 (41)	11 (79)
Individual/group				
Individual	0 (0)	1 (6)	2 (12)	0 (0)
Group	18 ((82)	10 (56)	8 (47)	9 (75)
None	4 (18)	7 (39)	7 (41)	3 (25)
Group type				
Children	2 (11)	0 (0)	1 (14)	0 (0)
Family	1 (6)	2 (17)	0 (0)	2 (22)
Community	15 (83)	6 (50)	6 (86)	6 (66)
Not specified	0 (0)	4 (33)	0 (0)	1 (11)

Table 5 (continued)

Coding of the types of client on the problematic, individual/group, group type, and socio-economic status dimensions

	Lists			
	List #1		List #2	
Dimension	College Students	Social Workers	College Students	Social Workers
Socio-economic status				
Lower through middle	11 (61)	8 (44)	2 (13)	5 (38)
All classes	6 (33)	5 (28)	11 (73)	6 (46)
None	1 (6)	5 (28)	2 (13)	2 (15)

Note. Values in parentheses are percents.